The Effectiveness of the Traditional Architectural Critique and Explorations of Alternative Methods

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Abstract

'The Crit Sucks'[1]

The paper examines how different techniques of conducting the traditional architectural critique[2] can be used to facilitate more effective learning amongst students. After a literature review which collates contemporary concerns about the professional and personal consequences of the traditional crit, particularly in the context of equality and diversity; analytical observation techniques showed that habitual methods of teaching demonstrated low levels of understanding, feedback and discussion. On the other hand, tutor led, process focused review led to higher levels of cognition, but only the same frequency of student participation in discussion as that achieved by traditional methods. Student centred methods however, showed the highest levels of both understanding and individual participation. It is recommended as some participants were unused to the student centred approach, that they are introduced to such practices and environments in their earliest year of study. The research developed a consistent and reproducible method of recording and evaluating the effectiveness of learning and teaching activities in a critique situation.

Keywords: Critique, Crit, Design Studio, Assessment, Student Centred Learning

1 graffito on the side of a former table in the School of Landscape Architecture's Seminar Room R2b.

2 the words crit, critique, review or jury are used interchangeably throughout the text

Introduction

Reviews or critiques are widely employed amongst design professions as public or semi-public events for tutors to give feedback to students about their project work. Often however, and in the absence of an evaluation of outcomes for students, the format of these important events in the curricular calendar remains unvarying from year to year. The following scene is illustrated in The Crit (Doidge *et al.,* 2007, p. 7). The room has four white walls. It is twice as long as it is wide. On a wall at one end of the room a student has pinned up and presented their work. The other end of the room allows through traffic. Immediately at the front of the room, one metre away from the student, sit three academic members of staff who are asking questions about the presentation. There is intermittent coming and going at the back of the room, which distracts the twenty or so students who sit or stand behind the academics. This makes it difficult for them to hear what is being said. This is hard enough already, as staff direct their words only to the student who has presented, who in turn, responds only to the staff member concerned. Eye contact is similarly restricted. This lack of inclusiveness means that there is no group discussion about the project that has just been presented. Furthermore, the dialogue between tutors and the presenting student uses language which indicates performance at very low levels of understanding, indicated by the verb *describing*. Biggs (2003, p. 57) has classified the mere act of describing as indicative of a low level of cognition, which is likely to lead to surface learning only. Other low level activities he lists, are enumerating, paraphrasing, naming and memorising.

At the traditional critique, there is usually little comparative analysis of project work and little reference to theory or precedent by either staff or students. According to Biggs's classification, these activities, which demonstrate reflection, application and theorising for example, show higher levels of cognition and should lead to deep learning. No doubt such an intellectually impoverished situation arises because students in the audience are either too nervous in anticipation of presenting, or too relieved after their presentation to comprehend the proceedings or contribute to them. They are nervous because of the confrontational and negative atmosphere of the event. This sounds dramatic, for in reality the critique is usually boring and repetitive. In contrast this paper identifies some good practice which engages with students and leads to complex and spontaneous interactions between all participants.

At a basic operational level, good practice in critiques should:

- involve staff being inclusive in their use of eye contact;
- employ questions which make comparisons between student work;
- position staff and students in a non-hierarchical way (Parnell and Sara, 2004).

However, despite best intentions, such practice cannot always assure group participation in discussions. Therefore the second aim of this research is to identify new

strategies for critiquing in order to facilitate student ownership of reviews, and which encourages activities indicative of higher levels of cognition such as *theorising* and *applying,* which should lead to deep learning.

We are told (Lewis, 1998 p. 77) that the architectural jury (critique) is "the ceremonial culmination of each studio design project, the place where all the skills, knowledge and ideas of the prospective architect must fuse and find expression". However, according to Lewis, this culminating ceremony is unpredictable, as the assessment of architecture necessarily involves individual taste and subjectivity. More recently, Anthony (1991) has argued that *connoisseurship* based on notions of what constitutes good taste, instead of the use of explicit criteria is merely idiosyncratic and uninformative. It typifies what she calls the *master-mystery* phenomenon.

The author's own experience of critiques includes far more serious consequences of connoisseurship than just uneven and subjective assessment and students being unable to discover how their work is evaluated. A situation can occur when staff who regard themselves as *connoisseurs* cannot agree on the grading of a student. Tutors in open argument at a critique can then fight over the student's work and sometimes over the student. Academics, who are well known to be opposed on issues of theory or practice, can appear uninvited at each other's reviews and comment negatively on the proceedings. As a result students can become tribalised according to who is perceived as a particular tutor's acolyte. Such a situation can exist only when assessment is a matter of taste and not based on agreed criteria, which are made explicit to all concerned.

Wilkin, an educational consultant, articulates the phenomenon of connoisseurship further. She likens the review to a game without written rules, where tutors, who act as referees, know the rules, but the students, who act as players, do not (Wilkin, 2000). They can only learn the rules by breaking them and then endure the ensuing destructive criticism from tutors. The Society of Architectural Students in the UK has been so concerned about these matters that they made it the subject of a specially convened conference (CEBE, 2005, p. 7).

A scenario like this can only exist where there is an asymmetric power relationship between staff and students. Anthony (1991) also comments on the paternalistic atmosphere of the design studio where tutors are perceived and behave as surrogate parents. It is little wonder in this social context that students fear debate. Through extensive surveys, she found that this was particularly problematic for female students. The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) has been so concerned about the position of women within the profession that it commissioned research from the University of the West of England around the question 'Why do Women leave architecture?' (De Graft-Johnson *et al.,* 2003). Although women students have increased from 27% to 38% recently, only 13% enter the profession. What is there about their education as an architect that is putting them off practice?

After conducting in depth interviews amongst staff, students and practitioners, De Graft *et al.* (2003) cite as problems, the laddish behaviour of both staff and students, a predominance of white male members of staff, gender bias during crits (even when this is well intentioned), male bonding which allows more direct comment and alienating styles (arrogant, derogatory, egotistical, macho, and an acolyte syndrome). A similar issue also exists for black minority ethnic students (BME). The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) (2004) found that BME students thought the crit system was culturally specific and sometimes caused them to leave architecture. CABE (2004, p. 4) has recommended that "Architecture schools should consider reforms to the crit system to help improve perceptions of fairness, as well as helping to provide an atmosphere in which more women and BME students could flourish."

If research into the experience of women and BME students demonstrates that surviving the system may not necessarily always be linked to ability, then by extension this may also apply to individuals within the majority white male student population. Indeed, with reference to Kolb's (1984) learning cycle of doing, reviewing, conceptualising and retesting, Doidge *et al.* (2007) argue that presentation at critiques only reflects the first and most simple verb of the learning cycle. Deep learning achieved through knowing in action (Schön, 1983) is either not being demonstrated or indeed taking place. If survival is not based on the satisfaction of the intended learning outcomes, then on what is it based?

Anthony (1991) argues that students at crits learn more about presentation and playing the game, than about design. She goes on to propose that the covert intent of many design juries is to assimilate students from mass culture to high culture. Doidge *et al.* (2007) suggest that students become socialised; learning to like what tutors like and so distancing themselves from the wider needs of society and thus perpetuating the cycle. In fact Wilkin (2000), in an examination of the confrontational environment that exists between architects and clients and architects and other professionals in the built environment, questions whether architects and clients behave as if they are members of the same team. Thus, the formative consequences of the negative and confrontational critique ramify from the classroom to the professional office.

In order to test findings derived from the literature and to identify more constructive learning and teaching techniques, a series of live investigations was conducted. Traditional and non-traditional reviews were observed and analysed according to common criteria.

Method

Direct observation of live situations was used to identify attributes common to the traditional critique. This technique also evaluated the success of traditional critiques in facilitating higher levels of student learning, in comparison to new learning and

teaching methods informed by contemporary pedagogy. This was accomplished by the recording and classification of presentations and interactions, and through discussion with students after the event. All occasions examined were designed as interim reviews, where feedback delivered to students was formative in nature.

Detailed participation mapping was made of student presentations. Interaction types, such as two-way tutor to student, three-way tutor to student to tutor and three-way student to tutor to student were recorded and quantified. The content of student presentations was classified according to the following learning activities, which demonstrate progress from modest to more advanced levels of cognition. These are: describing, analysing, comparing, contextualising, applying and theorising. Presentations were also classified according to contextual references made to other projects in the room, individual development and professional or theoretical precedent.

The nature and quality of questions asked by tutors were classified by the author according to whether tutors were seeking information, testing an argument, evaluating outcomes or making contextual and theoretical comparisons. In order to encourage ownership of assessment and counter the *master-mystery phenomenon* described above, students were invited to use examples of their own work to evaluate their current level of understanding according to Biggs's (2003) structure of learning outcomes (SOLO), which is described on pages 13 and 14. As this assessment structure relates to levels of student cognition, rather than tutor centred rankings of students, where volatile standards are implicit it is inherently student centred, especially when employed in peer review.

Discussion of Case Studies

A traditional critique of undergraduate landscape architecture students was observed and mapped in order to confirm whether preconceptions and general views held in the literature were fair and reasonable. Using the same group of students before and after different critiquing styles were employed also acted as a baseline, control comparison. Mapping and content evaluation were undertaken of 19 student presentations by an observer, who did not participate at the event. The following general and qualitative characteristics of the traditional critique were noted.

- The purpose of the critique was not identified by staff.
- The content and format of presentations were not specified by staff.
- Advice on verbal presentation technique was not given.
- Tutors did not manage the occasion socially.
- Students presented individually in front of the class for an allotted time – although this was not always enforced by tutors.
- Tutors often sat at the front of the class, so eye contact was only made with the student presenting. In this situation the student presented to the

tutors, not to the class. Thus the majority of interactions occurred between tutors and the student presenting.

- Group discussion did not arise to any great extent.
- Questions asked by tutors were mostly about clarifying and seeking further information about the work.
- The content of most student presentations was mainly descriptive, using verbs indicative of lower levels of learning activity, such as describing.
- Only rarely did students analyse their work and locate it in the contexts of theory and precedent.
- In one instance a tutor was dismissive about the use of analogy in a presentation, which actually indicated a higher level of learning by the student (see first row of table below).

Results for a traditional review (first and second rows of table below) and the alternative methods (third row of table below) were tabulated according to the following proforma and three sample entries.

Student	Level of presentation	Interactions with staff and other students	Level of interactions between students	Comment
N. Other	Analytical, conceptual contextual structured	Two way with tutors asking for more information	None	Student complained privately after review that one tutor was dismissive about her use of analogy
X. Emplar	Conceptual structured	Two way with one tutor, asking for more information	Two way and three way discussion, which sought more information	Open invitation made to class for comment, which was successful
A.N. Other	Conceptual	Five, two way discussions	Conceptual	Opening student hesitant to begin, but free flowing discussions ensued after presentation

Analysis of the results shows that 50% of the presentations in the traditional critique demonstrated higher-level cognitive activities, which might be expected to lead to deep learning. However, just over 33% of the presentations stimulated any discussion amongst students. Debate, when it did occur, usually involved two or three participants and demonstrated a low level of cognitive activity, which might only lead to surface

learning. There appeared to be some correlation between the quality of the presentation and that of the ensuing discussion. Another point to note is that when tutors asked the class to take part in debate, using a closed question, this did not usually illicit engagement. The most successful discussion took place when a student did not pin-up any drawings, as her work was in sketchbook form, and therefore unfinished. Instead she discussed her design around the table with most students contributing energetically. Unwittingly, she had liberated the crit from its formal and physical bonds. Furthermore, this surprising departure also occurred at the end of the day, when most people had begun to find it hard to concentrate.

During a debriefing session after the critique discussion, the same group of students said that they found crits overlong, boring and repetitive and unlikely to give them clear or constructive feedback. Whilst welcoming the idea of more student centred methods, they stressed that they would still like to retain the opportunity of the individual presentation and individual feedback on their personal projects.

The irony of course, is that whilst tutors expect innovative solutions from students, they consistently adhere to the same traditional teaching methods themselves (Anthony, 1991). Three alternative critiquing methods were used as vehicles for the live investigations. They involved the same final year undergraduate students, who had previously taken part in the traditional crit. Students were briefed on the purpose of all three discussions, as advocated by Anthony (1991). Group discussion was built into the structure of the events, in the belief that this leads to deeper learning.

1. **The brief, the portfolio and the presentation** – three pyramid discussions about what makes a successful brief, what makes a successful portfolio and what makes a successful presentation? This was followed by a workshop on how the structure of learning outcomes (Biggs, 2003) might be expressed through design project work.
2. **The process map review** – students were asked to present their work as a process map. Peer recording of formative feedback given by tutors was required.
3. **The metaphor review** – students were asked to relate their work to a metaphor. Students in pairs were required to assess each other formatively according to a given template. Tutors, who did not participate otherwise, undertook the recording of feedback.

These teaching and learning activities (TLAs) were intended to focus on process rather than product, as recommended by Anthony (1991). They were designed as a sequence, on which student learning could be built progressively. The purpose of the pyramid sessions was to explain and encourage ownership of the criteria behind the assessment of the final year portfolio. It was also intended to construct a theoretical platform for critical reflection. Below is an extract from the handout (Stuart-Murray, 2007a), which explained the SOLO classification system to students and aimed to

relate it to the module's objectives. The workshop related the vocabulary of SOLO to the specific expectations and attributes of the design portfolio. What follows is an extract from the brief for the first event, which introduces the ideas behind SOLO.

The following design elements and processes in the portfolio will be assessed:

> *Analytical ability*
>
> *Conceptual thinking*
>
> *Contextual relationships*
>
> *Technical & functional resolution*
>
> *Ability to design at different scales*
>
> *Graphic & written communication*
>
> *The assessment system is based on the attainment of intended learning outcomes at standards ranging from excellent, very good, good and satisfactory. These words equate to letter grades A, B, C, and D, with E representing a failure to satisfy a majority of learning outcomes. In order to interpret words and grades in an intellectual context however, it may be useful to think of a structured taxonomy of how well learning outcomes can be achieved. Biggs's structure of learning outcomes (SOLO) is useful here (Biggs, 2003). He has five categories:*
>
> *Prestructural*
>
> *Unistructural*
>
> *Multistructural*
>
> *Relational*
>
> *Extended abstract*
>
> ***Prestructural***
>
> *This outcome misses the point of the problem set in the brief or descriptor.*
>
> ***Unistructural (D)***
>
> *The outcome dwells on one simple issue, which has been followed in the context of a complex problem. The work shows that the student is on the right track, but has only tackled one aspect of the problem. Learning tends to be at a surface level.*
>
> ***Multistructural (C)***
>
> *This outcome produces a collection of unrelated elements, which lack adequate organisation, and resemble a shopping list. Some aspects may be fit for*

purpose, others might be abstract, but they are not connected in a solution or solutions with a convincing structure. Learning can be deep or at the surface. The student cannot see the wood for the trees.

Relational (B)

Here the student has used concepts that integrate information sets and understands how to apply these concepts to familiar data or problems. Knowledge is declarative, but also connected and functional.

Extended abstract (A)

This outcome demonstrates an ability to apply knowledge and concepts to problems, which have not initially been foreseen. It is 'thinking outside the box' or beyond the brief. The approach is questioning and reflective.

Thinking about a hierarchy of verbs in relation to the learning experience can also be useful in understanding levels of attainment of learning outcomes. For example, moving from unistructural to extended abstract, typical verbs could be: Memorising, note taking, describing, explaining, relating, applying, and theorising.

The process map review

The idea of a process map as a theme for a review was to facilitate relational levels of learning outcomes as defined by SOLO. The brief for the process map critique offered the following guidance to students (Stuart-Murray, 2007b).

What is this thing that I have asked you to present? It is similar to a mind map. It places your design situation, problem or question, however unformed, at the heart of other types of information coming from your research. It could also be applied to your dissertation. Design involves research too.

The process map will arrange things like concepts, theories, found objects, materials, images, diagrams and sketches etc. on a sheet, on a wall or on a surface. These facts, things or processes, which you have investigated, observed or sensed, are related to the problem by the distance they are shown away from it. They are also interrelated and should be linked graphically to show this.

Why am I doing this? By placing the problem at the centre of a network, rather than at the end of a linear journey, you will focus on the processes, which lead to the product, rather than the product itself. In the formative stage of a project, this is really important.

The presentation of research angles will be underpinned and punctuated by iteration and reiteration of the problem. In this way your analysis and

> *exploration will be problem driven and design will arise quite naturally from process.*

The process map review was a success in some aspects. Over 66% of students presented using verbs which demonstrated higher levels of learning. The quality of discussions following the presentations was also high. This supports the earlier conclusion that a high level of discussion follows a high level of presentation. However the number of discussions did not increase from the previous, traditional review. This may have been because the occasion was tutor led and because to a lesser extent, student 'buddies' were engaged in taking notes. It is significant that discussions occurred at the beginning of the event, before the review had been bedded in and become repetitive.

The metaphor review

The idea of a metaphor as a theme for a review was to facilitate, almost by default, extended abstract levels of learning outcomes as defined by SOLO. The brief for the metaphor critique offered the following guidance to students (Stuart-Murray, 2007c).

> *What is a metaphor? A figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing, is used to designate another, thus making implicit comparison, as in 'a sea of troubles' or 'all the world's a stage.'*
>
> *One thing conceived as representing another; a symbol: '"Hollywood has always been an irresistible, prefabricated metaphor for the crass, the materialistic, the shallow, and the craven" (Gabler, N. New York Times Book Review November 23, 1986).*
>
> *The focus of this review will be on your design concept; how this has been arrived at and where it is leading? I would like you to centre your presentation on an object, thing, text (Prose, lyric or poetry), image (moving or static), theory or movement etc, which you can use as a metaphor to capture the essence of your project. As in the last review, the presentation should be non-linear, by continually referring back to the central metaphor.*
>
> This review will be student led, with one student in each pair reviewing the other one, who is presenting. Tutors will take notes of the feedback received on a standard form.

This critique differed significantly from the process map review and the traditional critique. Though like the previous review it was process driven, it was in contrast, almost completely student led. Tutors remained silent and took feedback notes on behalf of students, who were paired off to critique each other. Discussion between students happened automatically, as it was built in to the design of the event.

The review was almost 100% successful in generating both student presentations and discussions at a high level. However two students who did not employ metaphors, presented descriptively and experienced a similar level of discussion. Again this supports the view that a low level presentation leads to a low level discussion. In general, the results show that the translation from design into metaphor facilitated extended abstract levels of learning outcome. However it is disappointing to record that half the class did not attend the critique, as they were uncomfortable with the representation of their work as a metaphor. Such reticence on the part of final year students is a poor reflection of the programme's creative ambition and needs to be addressed in the design of learning and teaching activities in earlier years of study.

Summary and Conclusions

The research project was partially successful. Both the process map and metaphor reviews did facilitate presentations and discussions using vocabulary, which was indicative of higher levels of understanding. However, only the second event, which was student led, engendered almost complete student participation in debate. Here, discussions consisted of repeated two-way interactions, which in some cases became complex and multi-dimensioned. This outcome strongly suggests that student ownership of the critique is necessary for all students to benefit from higher levels of learning activity. However there was only 50% attendance at the last review.

This may be because review groups consisted of final year undergraduate students who after four years of higher education in landscape architecture had become habituated to its traditional critiquing style. They may also have been unwilling to take perceived risks with their portfolios, which they felt might prejudice final award bands. At an end of session debriefing, final year students did indeed confirm that they respected and enjoyed what they had experienced in the different critiques, but felt that they would have got more out of them had they been introduced in first year. Experience with new methods used in second year critiques, where greater and more enthusiastic participation in debates was achieved, confirmed this conclusion.

More fundamentally however, partial success may have been because the new TLAs were not structurally aligned with the aims and objectives of the modules and their assessment strategies. Without structural alignment, such changes in teaching, for all their innovation may be perceived by both staff and students as superficial, one off gimmickry rather than representing a fundamental and conceptual shift towards the student centred delivery of learning and teaching.

Nevertheless, the research shows that a process led, inclusive and student centred approach to critiquing styles facilitates more advanced levels of learning than traditional tutor centred approaches. In this study, the idea of the process map and the metaphor proved successful as devices to provide focus, stimulus and organisation for the critique. However for such approaches to be optimally effective, students have to have

had the opportunity to develop sufficient confidence to take ownership of the critique. Secondly, the design of student centred learning and teaching activities has to be aligned with other areas of curriculum design so that their aims and objectives are understood and shared by all parties concerned.

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